



The contours of migration are etched across the earth's surface, tracing the invisible wake of human movement upon oceans and across the land. In the exhibition *Sekali pendatang, tetap pendatang* (Once an immigrant, always an immigrant), Rozana Lee responds to the entangled mesh of these contours as they intersect with personal and national understandings of belonging and history.

Lee, of Chinese-Indonesian heritage, was born and raised in the Indonesian city of Banda Aceh. Her childhood was marked by the shifting tides of anti-Chinese legislation and the racial violence and political purge, these precipitated. Born five years after the 1965-66 anti-communist purge, which resulted in mass killings of ethnic Chinese across Indonesia, Lee grew up in a climate shaped by the enduring legacy of this violence. In 1998, amidst a renewed wave of anti-Chinese rioting, she fled the country, spending twelve years in Singapore before settling in Aotearoa.

The migratory pathways – woven through with dispossession, loss and hope – which have shaped the lives of Lee and her family are the foundational ground from which this exhibition has grown. The roots of her poetic visual language have emerged from an embrace of movement and mobility, as she forges a way of belonging that negotiates collective memory and generational trauma. In the film *Sekali pendatang, tetap pendatang*, from which the exhibition takes its name, Lee enacts a return journey to her family's textile shophouse in Banda Aceh. Through the handheld lens of her camera, we watch from a plane window as the expansive blue of sky and ocean give way to the scattered fringes of the Indonesian archipelago. As this physical journey unfolds, so too does a temporal one. The text which overlays the filmed footage outlines a history of the land below that encompasses colonisation, legislation, state violence and racial discrimination.

Contours of migration
Dr Kirsty Baker

Within the context of this contentious national history, Lee visits sites which resonate with personal stories of loss and memory. We watch as she travels to her family shophouse, and the tombs of her parents. Her mother's grave is unmarked, her body thought to be one of the 46,718 nameless victims of the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami buried at the Siron Tsunami Memorial Park. In contrast to the anonymity of this site of mass burial, her father's tomb – like those of her grandmother, grandfather, great grandmother and great-great grandmother – is marked by language. These marked sites are represented in the exhibition by *Shapes of love*, a series of five oil pastel rubbings on calico. These traced images act as both visual representation and indexical trace of the place where they were made. In *Sekali pendatang, tetap pendatang* we watch as Lee and her brother quietly visit these tombs, accompanied by the sound of a breeze pushing against the overgrown vegetation and the quiet chirp of birdsong. We see her methodically create the rubbings that will become *Shapes of love*, carefully stretching the calico flat and drawing oil pastels across their surface. By using this method of direct physical transference, rather than simply photographing the tombs, Lee privileges a form of recording – and of remembering – that extends beyond the visual. The haptic trace of her hand stretches from tomb to calico, from cemetery to art gallery, imbuing the work with a material sense of historical and personal remembering.

Stretched between steel posts, the fabric projection screen for *Sekali pendatang, tetap pendatang* is reminiscent of the calico that Lee draped across these ancestral tombs. It, too, carries the weight of another place into the gallery. Salvaged from the damaged remains of her family's shop, this tsunami-soiled fabric carries the weight of loss. Though water damage remains visible within its fibres, much of the personal damage caused by the tsunami remains unseen. However, through the act of reclamation and repurposing, Lee inscribes this fabric with the power of collective memory and love. She understands the power of materiality, the ways that physical objects – in this instance fabric marked by pigment or water – can act as holders of memory, of experience, of history.

In the works which make up *Cages of memories* Lee once again turns to fabric as a site to forge a visual language of meaning. Utilising an adaptation of the batik processes which are widespread across Indonesia, Lee uses hot wax as drawing medium. Rather than removing this wax from the fabric once it is dyed, she subverts this process by allowing it to remain. The contours of this solidified wax become three-dimensional, their raised surfaces forming ridges of pattern across the fine weave of the silk. Subject to movement as the fabric shifts and folds, these contours are fragile and brittle, etched with fine cracks and breakage. The precarity of wax as a drawing medium is emphasised by the method of display Lee has employed for the works. Having worked extensively with wax-drawn textiles, she has experimented with various modes of display: whether cascading vertically from a gallery ceiling, or mounted within freestanding wooden frames. Here she has commissioned the fabrication of large scale powder-coated steel frames, or cages. Operating in three dimensions, these cages are human in scale. They surround the diaphanous spills of fabric, which hang suspended within them, while allowing the viewer to circle the fabric works to view them from all angles. This sculptural mode of presentation draws out a bodily mode of viewing. Our bodies circle the cages as we visually trace the dense intricacy of the patterns stretched across the surface of the silk.

Now living in Aotearoa, as a fourth-generation descendant of Chinese immigrants to Indonesia, Lee's visual vocabulary draws on a wide range of symbolic imagery from across these cultures. In *Lotus and Kawung*, for instance, she creates a rhythmic all-over pattern which twines the lotus flower together with the Kawung – or four petal flower. The Kawung pattern is one of the oldest and most widespread in Indonesian batik, and was adapted from Buddhist lotus flower imagery. By bringing these forms into direct communication, Lee highlights both the commonality and adaptation of visual imagery across cultural traditions. Where *Lotus and Kawung* is dominated by an all-over pattern, in *Naga and Pintu Aceh* vast swathes of the dyed silk's golden ochre are left untouched. Against this background, a pulsing swirl of movement dances down the fabric. Four intricately drawn Chinese dragons, symbolic of heavenly power, border the vertical sweep of the silk. Six irregularly spaced doorways punctuate its central line. These Pintu Aceh – or doors of Aceh – represent Lee's hometown, emphasising the port city's significance as the 'gateway to Mecca'.

A gateway or door, much like a port, serves as a transitional space, a threshold between places and between modes of belonging. The patterns of migration that have shaped Lee's artistic practice are embedded in



Cages of memories: Lilies, stars, and quatrefoils, 2022, hot wax hand-drawing on silk, hand-dyed, 1850x1030mm, powder-coated steel frame 1670x1100x800mm.



Cages of memories: Naga and Pintu Aceh, 2022 (detail), hot wax hand-drawing on silk, hand-dyed, 1850x1030mm.

a mode of making that embraces this site of motion and transition, adapting techniques and imagery to forge a way of existing that honours both past and future. Throughout the exhibition we see Lee in constant motion – walking the streets of Aceh, driving from one place to another, looking at the landscape that slides past the window of a train as she arrives in Huizhou, journeying across the ocean in a plane. In the film *Lines of separation*, Lee travels to visit her ancestral homeland in China. As her contemplative journey unfolds, she quotes a poem written by her friend M Farzaneh. 'The arrow that is life shoots into the river,' she says, 'and flows to dwell in deeper frontiers.' This exhibition suggests that this sense of motion, the forward momentum of life's arrow, holds the potential to become a site of belonging itself.

This exhibition is kindly supported by the Chartwell Trust.

WAITĀKERE CONTEMPORARY GALLERY te uru

Rozana Lee
Sekali pendatang, tetap pendatang



Cages of memories: Mega Mendung, 2022 (detail), hot wax hand-drawing on silk, hand-dyed, 1850x1030mm.

Te Uru Waitākere Contemporary Gallery
18 March – 30 July 2023

TO BEGIN AGAIN

Rozana Lee

How does one define oneself? Is it through personal construct, or through social relationship with others, or both? Cultural theorist and political activist Stuart Hall asserts that identity is formed within representations. That is, a sense of oneself that emerges through the process of identity formation, not the one designed to correspond to some prior, prescribed condition. The self cannot be known without 'the other' to establish its boundaries. Otherness is therefore used as a benchmark against oneself, something that is always part of the self.¹

In the case of nation-building, Indonesia has constructed its national identity using Chinese as its 'others.' Chinese are not native to Indonesia. They immigrated to Indonesia between the mid 1600s and the early 1900s from Fujian or Guangdong provinces in Southern China, either by their own choice or as indentured laborers during Dutch colonisation. They settled in many locations across the Indonesian archipelago.² Known as Hakka or 'the guest people,' a nomadic tribe in China, my great-great grandparents from Huizhou and Meixian journeyed across the South China Sea and settled in Banda Aceh, the westernmost point of Indonesia in the early 1900s.

Chinese are often easily recognised by their physical appearance, cultural traditions, and religious practices. A traditional Chinese identity is very much a socially constructed identity which is highly malleable and influenced by the family, the environment and the people living in the same environment. This concept of 'the cobweb self' - being part of the larger group and with obligations to others - is similar to the Māori concept of 'whanaungatanga' or interconnectedness.³ To the Indonesian native, ethnic Chinese are perceived as newcomers or foreigners who originated from 'outside' of Indonesian territory and its boundaries. This automatically makes them 'not original' or 'not authentic.' Original here is defined within a prehistoric relationship to soil or land. As a result, the Chinese communities are considered as immigrants, regardless of how many generations they have lived in Indonesia.⁴

During the Dutch colonisation period (1602-1942), Indonesia was first controlled using a 'divide and rule' strategy. The society was classified into three groups with different rights and privileges. The Europeans were at the top, the foreign Orientals, which included Chinese, Arabs, Indians, and Japanese, were in the middle, and the Indigenous people were at the bottom. Some Chinese were later granted rights to engage in 'immoral' activities such as collecting taxes for the Dutch, selling opium, the operation of gambling establishments, pawnshops, and trading activities. These privileges created envy and resentment from the native population and resulted in the stereotyping of the Chinese as a rich community that dominated the Indonesian economy.⁵

In 1740, ten thousand Chinese labourers and traders in Batavia (now Jakarta) were killed following the plunge of sugar prices worldwide, resulting in financial problems for the colony. In 1825, the Dutch decided to turn the earlier set of racial groups around, citing their renewed interest in 'protecting the Indonesian native's rights' and adopted the 'Ethical policy' in 1901. This included higher taxes for the Chinese community, a ban on revenue farming, a separated living suburb away from other ethnicities, and restrictions from moving outside pre-defined boundaries without travel passes. This destroyed the already fragile assimilation process, changing the position of the Chinese from being the envied assistants of the Dutch to becoming the most unwanted ethnicity in the nation.⁶

This constructed Chinese identity later became an important political tool that was manipulated by postcolonial Indonesian regimes. The Chinese minority were often targeted as scapegoats, especially during times of national crisis. In 1965-66, an anti-communist purge associated with the Cold War led to the mass killings of ethnic Chinese across Indonesia and the overthrow of president Sukarno by the Indonesian military under the leadership of Major General Suharto. Imprisonment, torture and forced labour continued for more than a decade after the purge.⁷ In 1998, the Asian financial crisis triggered a period of civil unrest demanding the stepping down of the ruling president, Suharto. This subsequently caused another period of anti-Chinese rioting and tragedy: offices, shops, and houses were burned down, women were raped, people were killed.⁸ These were the circumstances when I left Jakarta in 1998.

It is disappointing to think we might have brought this on ourselves as immigrants' descendants - that we should, somehow, be grateful. Yet, the nation seems to demand this from us in their determination to disguise or forget the history. When I mentioned to my late father that I was going to write about this, he sounded worried. He told me it might not be the best thing to do, as it would be offensive and bring more attention to the Chinese minority. This attitude can be seen in many Chinese ethnic identities in Indonesia; living with shame and fear, keeping quiet despite experiencing prolonged racial discrimination, and at times violence. However, philosopher and cultural theorist Kwame Appiah asserts that 'self-undermining identity' in fact often results from the rejection of one's ethnic and or religious identity precisely because it is claimed as 'irrational' by the Cartesian self, which focuses on the autonomous self over the socially defined self and community. The Cartesian self is clearly the model of good citizenship for its rationality and sensibility.⁹

The fact is, unlike community, we will never meet or know most of the people who share the same nationality with us. We think about what we have in common; same citizenships, same language, equal rights, and the same country we live in. A nation is thought to provide people with a sense of belonging and their primary identity. The word 'nation' is synonymous with 'the people.' A nation is therefore an 'imagined political community' as rightfully theorised by Benedict Anderson.¹⁰ A nation is considered as a protector of land that includes our ancestors' graves and, hence, is of great importance. Therefore, nationalism is often used to justify the use of violence against one's national enemy, internal or external.

My great-great-grandmother, my great-grandmother, my grandparents, and my father were all laid to rest in a Chinese community cemetery in Matai Ie, Banda Aceh. My mother, on the other hand, who was taken by the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami is thought to be buried among 46,718 Acehese, regardless of ethnicity, race, or religion, in Siron, the biggest mass burial site for the 2004 tsunami victims. They were stacked together, one on top another, all in one big hole without names, or proper identification. Had she profaned the grave? I would argue she had broken all the 'boundaries.'

Although the current policy of the Indonesian government favours assimilation of the Chinese population into the local communities, the diverse ethnic identities and dialects in Indonesia highlights diversity rather than unity, despite its national motto of 'Bhinneka Tunggal Ika' or 'Unity in Diversity.' Many Chinese Indonesians, including my youngest brother, have now integrated with the native community through interracial marriage. Some have subsequently converted to Islam, following the majority of the Indonesian population. However, as the Indonesian phrase goes, "Sekali pndatang, tetap pndatang" (once an immigrant, always an immigrant), and so Chinese alienation continues today, destroying the sense of belonging and safe continuity for those residing in Indonesia.

Edited excerpt from MFA thesis 'To begin again,' completed at The University of Auckland, 2018

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Sekali pndatang, tetap pndatang, 2022 (still), single-channel video, 15.14mins



Cages of memories: Birds of paradise and Pintu Aceh, 2022 (detail), hot wax hand-drawing on silk, hand-dyed, 1850x1030mm.



Cages of memories: Lotus and Kawung, 2022, hot wax hand-drawing on silk, hand-dyed, 1850x1030mm, powder-coated steel frame 1670x1100x800mm.

Rozana Lee (b. 1970) was born in Banda Aceh, and is of Chinese-Indonesian heritage. She moved to Aotearoa New Zealand in 2010 and is currently based in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland. She holds a Master of Fine Arts from Elam School of Fine Arts, University of Auckland (2018). Lee has undertaken artist residencies at Instinc, Singapore in 2016, and Making Space, Guangzhou in 2019. Recent projects and exhibitions include *Several degrees of attention*, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, Ngāmotu New Plymouth, 2022; *Crossings*, Adam Art Gallery Te Pātaka Tōi, Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington, 2021; *Te wbeke: pathways across Oceania*, Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū, 2020; *Reconfigure(d)*, Making Space, Guangzhou, 2019; and *Two oceans at once*, St Paul St Gallery, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, 2019.

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